

February 11, 2012

At stake: Freedom of Religion, Freedom of Conscience

To the Faithful of the Diocese of Des Moines:

The founders of our nation, had remarkable insight into the components of democracy. They enshrined their vision in documents that have weathered periodic storms and stiff challenges. These documents – The Declaration of Independence, The Constitution and the Bill of Rights have been the bedrock of our government and our life together. They have also sparked inspiration for other nations as they labor to shape their governments especially in the documents’ universal applicability to the dignity of the human person.

One guarantee that has been particularly instrumental in preserving the freedoms we cherish is that of Freedom of religion and its companion freedom of conscience. As recently as January 11, 2012, when the Supreme Court rendered the decision *Hasanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and School v. EEOC* these freedoms have been vigorously upheld. In writing for the court in its unanimous decision, Chief Justice Roberts stated “The government is not to tell religion what to believe.”

These foundational rights, are now being seriously threatened. When Congress passed the “Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act” it assigned to the cabinet department, Health and Human Resources (HHS), the responsibility of drawing up the “Rules” that would govern the implementation of this legislation.

In late summer, HHS published rules, for which before being finalized, it sought comment. Comment indeed HHS received. Over 400,000 messages were sent highly critical of the provision that all employers, including those of Catholic institutions like our Universities, colleges, hospitals (now serving 1/6 of the country’s population) be forced to provide healthcare insurance that included coverage for sterilization, abortifacients (abortion inducing drugs) and birth control drugs. There would be no co-pay and no sharing of costs.

The contention of those communicating with HHS in opposition to these rules was that the use of institutional (Catholic) money for this purpose was intrusion of government into religion, mandating action that was contrary to religious beliefs and thus violating our consciences. We as Catholics believe according to natural law and scripture that this is coverage of procedures that are immoral and thus we cannot use our resources to make them possible.

Our conclusion to this action of HHS and the government is that the rules are unacceptable. In initial reaction, I invite all of the members of the Catholic Community through their parishes and other faith relationships to educate themselves on the serious issues at stake. The second and ongoing step, as always in matters such as these, is to pray that our future response will be guided by wisdom and inspired by courage.

An initiative that each of us can take at this time is to communicate the unacceptability of these provisions to our Congressional representatives and our Senators, to HHS and to the White House. Finally, there will be ample and timely opportunity to organize a response as the Catholic Church in the United States with one voice on this matter.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

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The Most Reverend Richard E. Pates
Bishop of Des Moines